

Pizza time fun

Dolli Dimples, one of Pizza Time Theater's three dimensional characters, is being readied for center stage. Started in San Jose in 1977, Pizza Time now operates in 12 states plus Australia. In addition to the entertaining characters, the restaurant features electronic and arcade games. For the story, please turn to page 3.

Pizza Time

Pizza finds the electronics age

By Marcia Partch

The setting evokes a playful feeling. Like elves in Santa's toy shop, workers are busy cutting, sewing and stapling.

But instead of the North Pole, this is the home of Chuck E. Cheese, Pizza Time Theatre's corporate headquarters in Sunnyvale.

Pizza Time Theatre is the newest and fastest growing restaurant chain in the country. A combination pizza parlor, electronic midway and family entertainment center, it has become a national phenomenon.

The prototype restaurant for the chain was opened in San Jose in May 1977 by Nolan K. Bushnell, founder of Atari and inventor of Pong, the first video game.

From its beginnings on Winchester Boulevard, Pizza Time Theatre has expanded to 48 locations in 12 states and Australia.

According to Gene Landrum, Pizza Time's vice president of operations, plans call for a total of 80 locations by the end of this year.

A visit "backstage at Pizza Time Theatre only increases one's fascination with Bushnell's creation.

On workbenches the Pizza Time Players, three-dimensional animal characters who entertain at the restaurants, are in various stages of production.

Hanging nearby is a head for Chuck E. Cheese, a life-size mouse reminiscent of a Disney character that acts as host at every Pizza Time Theatre.

Each of his furry "walk-around" suits is constructed at the Sunnyvale facility, said Kathy Wolf, wardrobe supervisor. Pizza Time owners purchase them at a cost of $1,000 to $1,500.

Elsewhere, shelves are lined with other members of the Pizza Time cast: Jasper T. Jowls, a banjo-playing dog; Mr. Munch, the purple pizza eater; and Pasqually, an Italian chef.

In a corner ready for shipping sits Dolli Dimples, a hippopotamus that sings in the restaurants' piano bars.

"A big part of my job is finding the right accessories," Wolf explained. With a background in art and costumes, she oversees the designing and outfitting of all characters.

A close look at Dolli Dimples reveals the attention shown to detail. Dolli's satin lips are carefully stitched and her styrofoam fingers and ears gleam with costume jewelry.

New characters are constantly being created, Wolf said, and are rotated to restaurants as "guest stars." The "Beagles," a group of long-haired hounds who sing Beatles songs, are a popular new addition to dining rooms.

A new Memphis, Tenn., location will be the first outfitted with "King," a nine-foot lion who sings Elvis Presley songs.

New skits and songs for the players are also being created, according to animator James Barnes.

"Cyberamics" is the term used to describe the computer-controlled production numbers, he explained.

Coordinating the characters' movements with the actors' voices and music is an intense process.

"It takes four to five hours of programming to produce one minute of tape," Barnes said. Each taped show averages three to five minutes in length.

Yet, musical entertainment is only one aspect of the Pizza Time concept. Another important element is the "Fantasy Forest" room, which houses video games, standard arcade games and kiddie rides for toddlers.

Games are carefully chosen for their playing appeal, said Inda Trinworth who buys game equipment and designs room layouts.

Depending on size, each restaurant has 65 to 150 video games, Trinworth said. Among the most popular are Defender, Gorf, Beserk, Astroid Deluxe and Scramble.

"Defender is our highest earner," she said, "averaging $450 to $700 per week."



Future performers / Meet the Beagles — Pizza Time Theater characters who sing Beatles songs for patrons of the restaurant.

While pizza, electronic games and singing stuffed animals may seem an unlikely combination, Pizza Time Theatre has proved enormously successful — and profitable.

Landrum estimates each restaurant's annual earnings will reach $1.5 million this year.

Communications Manager Suzie Crocker attributes Pizza Time's success to its wholesome family atmosphere. Parents can feel comfortable bringing children and letting them roam and play, she said.

"You can eat, play games. There's entertainment for everyone in the family," she said.

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